

PROLOGUE

Chapter I: Ronquerolles Castle

On the first of January, 182*, Baron François Armand de Luizzi was seated by the fire in his castle at Ronquerolles.

Though I haven't seen that castle in twenty years, I remember it perfectly. Unlike typical feudal castles, it lay at the bottom of a valley. In those days it consisted of four towers joined by four wings; both the towers and the connecting buildings were capped by steep slate roofs, a rarity in the Pyrenees. As a result, from the hills that surrounded it the castle looked more like a dwelling from the sixteenth or seventeenth century than a fortress from 1327, which is when it was built.

I was often inside the castle as a child, and I remember I especially admired the large flagstones that formed the flooring in the attics where we played. Those flagstones—which put to shame the puny floor tiles at my house—had protected the ramparts of Ronquerolles when it was a stronghold; later they'd been covered over with peaked roofs, like those you can still see on the Vincennes Gate, but without altering the original structure.

Nowadays we know that of all durable materials, iron is the least durable. So I'll be careful not to say Ronquerolles seemed to have been built of iron, so respectful had the centuries been to it; but I can say the great building was in a remarkable state of preservation. It looked like the whim of some wealthy connoisseur of the Gothic style, who just yesterday had built those walls, not one stone of which had deteriorated, and carved those floral arabesques, not one line of which had been broken nor a single detail marred. And yet in living memory no one had ever been seen working on the upkeep or repair of that castle.

Still, it had undergone several changes since its original construction, the most striking of which was visible on the southern approach to Ronquerolles. Of the six windows in the façade on that side, no two were alike. The first window on the left, as you faced the castle, was ogival in shape; a stone cross with sharply defined edges divided it into four panes filled with ordinary glass. The next window was like the first, except each pane, held in a hinged iron frame, contained clear glass divided into a lead-outlined diamond pattern. The third window had lost its ogive and its stone cross; the ogive had been bricked in, and the glass in the iron frames had been replaced by a heavy wood-framed sash window, opening vertically like a guillotine. The fourth window had two casements, one on the inside and one on the outside, both latched, and both divided into small panes, and besides that it was protected by a shutter painted red. The fifth window had only one casement, with large panes of glass, plus a louvered shutter painted green. Finally the sixth window held mirrored glass, behind which could be seen a brightly colored shade; that window too was protected by thick shutters.

The wall continued unbroken after those six windows, the sixth of which the people of Ronquerolles had noticed for the first time on the first of January, 182*, which was also the day after the death of Baron Hugues François de Luizzi, Baron François Armand de Luizzi's father, without anyone being able to say who'd added that window and placed it where it was. The strangest thing was that, according to local tradition, all the other windows had appeared the same way, in similar circumstances: that is to say, without anyone seeing any work performed, and always the day after the death of each successive proprietor of the castle in turn. And it was certainly a fact that each of those windows belonged to a bedroom that had been closed, never to be reopened, at the death of whoever had occupied it all his life.

If its owners had lived at Ronquerolles full time, that peculiar mystery would probably have upset the locals more; but for over two centuries each new heir of the Luizzis had spent only twenty-four hours at the castle before leaving it, never to return. That had been the case with Baron Hugues François de

Luizzi; and when his son François Armand de Luizzi arrived on the first of January, 182*, he announced he'd be leaving the next day.

The caretaker had only learned his master was coming when he saw him enter the castle; and the good man's astonishment turned to terror when, meaning to prepare a room for the newcomer, he saw him head toward the corridor which led to the mysterious rooms we've spoken of—and then, with a key he drew from his pocket, the baron opened a door the caretaker had never seen before, and which had appeared in the corridor just the way the new window had appeared in the façade.

The doors were as varied as the windows, each designed in a different style; the latest one was made of rosewood with copper inlay. Beyond the doors, the wall continued unbroken along the corridor, just as outside the façade continued unbroken beyond the windows. Between those blank interior and exterior walls there were presumably other rooms, but—since no doubt they were intended for the heirs of the Luizzis yet to come—they, like the future to which they belonged, remained sealed and inaccessible. Those we might call the bedrooms of the past were locked and unknown as well, but the doors and windows opening onto them remained. The new room—the bedroom of the present, if you will—was the only one open; and throughout that day, the first of January, anyone who wished could enter it freely.

That corridor, which strikes us as somewhat fantastical, just felt damp and cold to Luizzi, and he ordered a roaring fire built in the white marble hearth of his new room. He spent the whole day there, going over the accounts of the Ronquerolles property. Those concerning the castle itself didn't take long: Ronquerolles brought in nothing and cost nothing. But Luizzi now owned several nearby farms whose leases had expired and whose contracts he wanted to renew.

Anyone besides those farmers entering the baron's room would've been struck by its fashionable elegance. The room was entirely done in Louis the Fifteenth style, which is to say the furniture was both grotesque and uncomfortable. Since a few of the old houses in the area had kept original specimens from that period as souvenirs, what passed for modern elegance among the Luizzis looked merely old-fashioned to the good country neighbors, who rated the fussy rococo furnishings of the new room well below the mahogany desk and chest of drawers of the lawyer's wife.

Anyway, the whole day was spent in negotiating and settling on the rates for the new leases, and it was only when night fell that Luizzi found himself alone. As we've said, he was seated by the fire, with a table next to him on which a candle burned. While he sat there, lost in thought, the pendulum clock rang midnight, then twelve thirty, then one, then one thirty. At the chime announcing that last time, he rose and began to pace with agitation. He was a tall man, with a figure that conveyed forcefulness; the natural look on his face expressed resolve. Yet now he trembled, and his agitation grew the closer the hands of the clock came to two. Several times he stopped, as if he'd heard some noise from outside, but nothing broke the solemn silence around him.

Finally he heard the slight click of the gears as the clock prepared to strike the hour. A sudden drastic pallor spread across his face. He stood still and closed his eyes, like a man about to be taken ill. The first chime of two o'clock rang out in the silence. That sound pulled him out of his prostration; before the second chime had rung he'd seized a small silver bell that lay on the table and had shaken it violently, while speaking a single word: "Come!"

Anybody can have a small silver bell, anybody can shake it at exactly two o'clock in the morning while saying "Come!" But realistically nobody will have happen what happened next to Armand de Luizzi. The little bell he'd shaken so fiercely gave out only a weak sound and rang only once, a *ding* that vibrated sadly and without echo. When he called out "Come!" he put into it all the effort of a man who means to be heard across a vast distance; and yet his voice, projected forcefully from his chest, had nothing of the resolute, imperative tone he'd intended, and as it actually left his mouth it sounded like no more than a timid plea.

He himself was still registering surprise at that incongruous result when he noticed, in the chair he'd just left, a person who could be a man, because it had a man's self-assured manner, or who could be a woman, because it had a woman's face and graceful limbs, and who was certainly the Devil, because it hadn't walked in, it had simply appeared. It was wearing a dressing gown with plain sleeves that suggested nothing about the sex of the individual inside it.

In silence Luizzi studied that unusual person while it settled itself comfortably in the Voltaire-style armchair by the fire. The newcomer leaned back casually and reached toward the fire with the forefinger and thumb of one slender white hand. Those two digits stretched out like a pair of tongs and took hold

of a coal. The Devil—for it was the Devil in person—used it to light a cigar he found on the table. No sooner had he taken a puff than he tossed away the cigar with disgust and said to Luizzi, “Don’t you have any black market tobacco?”

The baron said nothing.

“In that case, have one of mine.” From the pocket of his dressing gown the Devil drew a small cigarette case of exquisite taste. He pulled out two cigarettes, lit one with the coal he was still holding, and handed it to Luizzi. The baron refused it with a gesture, and in a quite natural tone the Devil said, “Ah, you’re straitlaced, my friend—too bad!” Then he began to smoke, without spitting, leaning back and occasionally whistling a contradance tune, nodding his head slightly along with the beat in the most impudent way.

Luizzi still stood unmoving before this odd Devil. Finally he broke the silence: in the loud, staccato voice that typifies the modern dramatic style, he said, “Son of Hell, I summoned you...”

“First, my friend,” interrupted the Devil, “I don’t know why you’re addressing me informally as *tu*; it’s very bad manners. It’s a habit people you call artistic have picked up among themselves—a false show of friendship that doesn’t stop them from envying and hating and despising each other! It’s a way of talking your novelists and playwrights use for the expression of passions pushed to their absolute extreme, but it’s something well-bred people never do. Since you’re neither a writer nor an actor, I’d be obliged to you if you’d address me the way you would a stranger, which will be much more appropriate. I’ll also observe that in calling me the Son of Hell you’re repeating a piece of foolishness that shows up in all known languages. I’m no more the Son of Hell than you’re the Son of Your Bedroom just because you happen to be staying here.”

“Still, you’re the person I summoned,” replied Luizzi with an affectation of great dramatic power.

The Devil gave him a dirty look and replied loftily, “You’re a scoundrel. You think you’re talking to your bellboy?”

“I’m talking to someone who’s my slave!” cried Luizzi, touching the little bell in front of him.

“Just as you please, baron. But, my word, you’re quite the young man of our time: ridiculous and boorish! Since you’re so confident you can give me orders, you could afford to be polite; it wouldn’t cost you much. Anyway, your manners are those of a jumped-up peasant—the kind who thinks sprawling in the back of his carriage makes him look like he’s always had one. You’re from an old family, you’ve got a reasonably distinguished name, you present a decent appearance, and you don’t need this ridiculous posturing to make a good impression.”

“The Devil, delivering a sermon! That’s odd, and...”

“And you, don’t try any politician’s debating tricks. Don’t put stupid words in my mouth just so you can triumphantly refute them. I don’t make moralizing speeches; I leave that pastime to crooks and kept women. I hate phonies. If heaven had been gracious enough to grant me children, I’d rather have given them two vices than one affectation.”

“You must have plenty to give away!”

“Many fewer than the most virtuous Parisian bourgeois. To take advantage of vices, you have to have none. To claim the Devil has vices would be like saying the doctor who lives off your ailments is sick, and the lawyer who gets fat off your lawsuits is litigious, and the judge appointed to punish crimes is a murderer.”

The conversation between the supernatural personage and Luizzi had taken place without either of them moving. Up to now the baron had talked more to keep from looking dumbfounded than to say anything he meant. He’d gradually overcome the confusion and astonishment caused by his interlocutor’s appearance and behavior, and he now resolved to broach another subject, one no doubt more important to him. He therefore took a second armchair, sat down on the other side of the fireplace, and examined the Devil more closely.

Now he could see better, and could admire the refined elegance of his guest’s features and figure. Still, if this hadn’t been the Devil, it wouldn’t have been easy to decide whether this pale, beautiful face and this frail, restless body belonged to a young man of eighteen devoured by secret cravings or to a woman of thirty worn out by pleasure. As for the voice, it would’ve been too low to be a woman’s—if we hadn’t invented the contralto, that female baritone that promises more than it delivers. As for the look in the Devil’s eye—the quality that betrays our own thoughts whenever it isn’t being used to decipher the thoughts of others—that look gave away nothing. The Devil’s eye didn’t speak, it looked.

Luizzi finished his inspection in silence; convinced he couldn't win a battle of wits with this inexplicable being, he picked up his little silver bell and rang it once more.

At that command—for such it was—the Devil got up and stood before Luizzi in the attitude of a servant awaiting his master's orders. That movement, though it lasted no more than a tenth of a second, had been accompanied by a total transformation in the Devil's appearance and dress. The fantastical being from earlier had vanished, and in his place the baron now saw a yokel in livery, with meaty hands in white cotton gloves, and a drunkard's face above a red waistcoat, and flat feet in big shoes, and no calves in his stockings.

"Here I am, Your Honor," said the newcomer.

"Who are you?" cried Luizzi, offended by the man's crude and insolent servility—the universal quality of the French domestic servant.

"I'm not the Devil's valet, I only do what I'm told, but I do what I'm told."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for Your Honor's orders."

"You don't know why I summoned you?"

"No, Your Honor."

"You're lying!"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"What's your name?"

"Whatever Your Honor wants."

"What were you christened?"

The Devil didn't move, but the whole castle, from the weathervane down to the wine cellar, began to laugh. Luizzi was afraid, and to hide it he became angry: it's a method as common as singing.

"Well, answer me: don't you have a name?"

"I've got as many as you please. I've served under all kinds of names. A gentleman who'd been exiled during the Revolution hired me in 1814 and called me Brutus to make fun of the Republic in my person. After that I worked for an academician who changed Pierre, the name I was using, to La Pierre, as being more literary. I was fired for falling asleep in the front hall while the gentleman was delivering a lecture in his parlor. The stockbroker who took me on next really wanted to call me Jules, because his wife's lover was named Jules, and the husband found it vastly entertaining to say in front of his wife, 'That animal Jules! That clumsy oaf Jules! That clown Jules!' and so on. I quit on my own initiative, I was so tired of being insulted by proxy. Then I worked for a chorus girl who was keeping a French peer..."

"You mean a French peer who was keeping a chorus girl?"

"I mean what I said. The story's not well known, but I'll tell it to you someday, if you ever want to publish a treatise on human morality."

"So you're already back to moralizing?"

"As a servant, I do as little as I can."

"So now you're my servant?"

"No choice. I tried coming to you in another role, and you treated me like a lackey. Since I couldn't force you to be polite, I resigned myself to being insulted, and so now I'm what I assume you want me to be. Does Your Honor have no orders for me?"

"Yes, in fact I do. But I also want to ask for your advice."

"If Your Honor will permit me to say so, asking your servant for advice is playing a scene out of a seventeenth-century comedy."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"From the serialized stories in the newspapers."

"So you read them? Well! What did you think?"

"Why do you expect me to think anything about people who don't think?"

Luizzi stopped again, realizing he wasn't getting any closer to his purpose with this new character than with the previous one. He picked up the bell; but before he rang it he said, "Even though you're the same person in a different form, I don't feel like discussing the subject we have to talk about while you're like that. Can you change?"

"I'm at Your Honor's orders."

"Can you go back to the way you were before?"

“On one condition: that you give me one of the coins in that purse.”

On the table Luizzi saw a purse he hadn't noticed before. He opened it and drew out a coin. It was made of some priceless metal, and bore only this inscription: *ONE MONTH OF THE LIFE OF BARON FRANÇOIS ARMAND DE LUIZZI*. Instantly he understood the mystery of that kind of payment, and he dropped the coin back into the purse, which felt quite heavy—and that made him smile.

“That's too high a price for a mere whim.”

“So you've become a miser?”

“How do you mean?”

“Just that you threw away lots of that money to get less than you're asking for now.”

“I don't remember doing that.”

“If I were allowed to reckon up your accounts, you'd see there isn't a single month of your life that you exchanged for something reasonable.”

“Maybe so, but at least I lived.”

“Depends what you mean by living.”

“Does the word have more than one meaning?”

“Two very different ones. For lots of people, to live is to surrender your life to all the demands that surround you. Someone who lives like that is described as *good-natured* when he's young; when he grows up he's called *a fine fellow*; and when he's old he's known as an *excellent gentleman*. Those three names have one synonym in common: the word *sucker*.”

“And you think I've lived my life as a sucker?”

“I think Your Honor agrees with me, since he only came to this castle to give up one way of living and assume the other.”

“And can you define that other one for me?”

“Since that's the subject of the bargain we're going to make together...”

“Together? No!” interrupted Luizzi. “I don't want to bargain with you. I'd find it disgusting. Your appearance is absolutely repellent.”

“But that's a condition in your favor: you won't give away too much to someone you don't like. A king who's negotiating with an ambassador he admires always makes some dangerous concession; a woman negotiating her seduction with a man who appeals to her always surrenders fifty percent of her usual terms; a father-in-law negotiating his daughter's marriage contract with a son-in-law he likes often gives the boy the right to ruin his wife. To avoid being cheated, you should only do business with unlikable people. Distaste will do the job of good sense.”

“And it'll do me the job of getting rid of you,” said the baron as he rang the little magic bell that forced the Devil to obey him.

Just the way the androgynous creature who'd shown up first had vanished, now the second manifestation—not the Devil himself but the version of the Devil who wore livery—also vanished, and in his place Luizzi now saw a fairly handsome young man. He was of that type of man for whom the term changes every quarter century, but which nowadays is known as a dandy. His white trousers stretched like a bowstring from his suspenders to his under-shoe straps. Resting his spurred and varnished boots on the fireplace surround, he leaned against the back of Luizzi's armchair. Perfectly gloved, the cuffs turned back on the sleeves of his tailcoat with glistening buttons, a monocle in his eye and a gold-headed walking stick in his hand, he looked exactly like some friend paying a visit to Baron Armand de Luizzi.

The illusion was so effective the baron stared at him like someone he knew. “Have you and I met somewhere?”

“I never go there!”

“Did I see you on horseback in the park?”

“I never ride!”

“Then were you in a carriage?”

“I never take one!”

“Ah, now I have it! I knew it—I played cards with you at Madame de...”

“I never gamble!”

“But you were waltzing with her.”

“I never dance!”

“You weren't courting her?”

“I never go there, and I never pay court!”

Luizzi felt a strong desire to beat this gentleman with a riding crop to cure him of his insolence. But reason came to his rescue, and he began to understand that if he let himself be drawn into arguing with the Devil, given how many different forms that personage might assume, he'd never get to the point of the interview. So he resolved to be done with this version and with any others. As he rang the little bell again he cried, “Satan, hear me and obey!”

He'd barely finished speaking when the supernatural being he'd summoned appeared in all of his sinister splendor. It was indeed the fallen angel evoked in poetry: perfect beauty debased by pain, transformed by hatred, perverted by debauchery—and yet still retaining, when the face was at rest, some dormant trace of its celestial origins... But as soon as he spoke, the movement of his features conveyed an existence consumed by vile passions. Still, among all the repellent expressions passing across his face, the dominant look was one of deep disgust.

Rather than wait for the baron to ask him a question, he spoke first. “Here I am, to conclude the bargain I made with your family, by which I must give each Baron de Luizzi of Ronquerolles what he asks for. You know the terms of the bargain, I assume?”

“Yes. In exchange for that gift, each of us will be yours—unless he can prove he was happy for ten years of his life.”

“And each of your ancestors,” continued Satan, “asked me for what he thought happiness would be, so as to escape me at the hour of his death.”

“And they were all wrong, weren't they?”

“All of them. They asked me for wealth, for glory, for knowledge, for power; and power, knowledge, glory, and wealth all made them miserable.”

“So the bargain is entirely to your advantage, and I should refuse to make it?”

“If you can.”

“Isn't there something I could ask for that would make me happy?”

“There is one thing.”

“I know it's not up to you to tell me what it is; but can't you tell me if it's something I know of?”

“You know of it. It's been mixed up in everything that's happened in your life—sometimes within you, more often in other people—and I can assure you most people don't need my help to possess it.”

“Is it some moral quality? Is it some material thing?”

“Now you're asking too much. Have you decided? Talk fast, I'm in a hurry to wrap this up.”

“You weren't in such a hurry earlier.”

“That's because earlier I was in one of the thousand disguises that hide me from myself and make the present bearable. When I imprison my being in the features of some human creature, however crooked or despicable, I find myself at the level of whatever century I'm in, and I'm not bothered by the miserable role I've sunk to. There's only one creature of your species who, having become ruler of the small kingdom of Sardinia, had the idiotic vanity still to style himself king of Cyprus and Jerusalem.¹ Vanity is satisfied with great words, but pride demands great things, and, as you know, that led to my fall—the hardest test my pride ever faced. After my struggle with God, after I'd led so many mighty souls, aroused such strong passions, unleashed such enormous catastrophes, I'm ashamed to be reduced to the shabby schemes and foolish affectations of this age; I conceal from myself what I was, so as to forget, as much as I can, what I've become. The form you've now forced me to assume is therefore hateful and unbearable to me. So hurry up and tell me what you want.”

“I still don't know, and I was counting on you to help me choose.”

“I told you, that's not possible.”

“But you can still do for me what you did for my ancestors: you can lay bare for me other men's passions, their hopes and joys and sorrows, the secrets of their existence, so that from that education I can find some light to guide me.”

“I can do that—but you should know that your ancestors agreed to give themselves to me before I began my explanation. Look at the contract: I've left blank the name of the thing you're going to ask

¹ The Italian kings of the House of Savoy, though reduced during the Napoleonic wars to ruling nothing but the island of Sardinia, still laid claim to long-meaningless Crusader-era titles to the kingdoms of Jerusalem and Cyprus. Soulié may have in mind Victor Emmanuel I (reigned 1802-21), or Charles Felix (reigned 1821-31), or Charles Albert (reigned 1831-49).

for. Sign it. Then, after you've heard me out, you yourself can write in what you want to be or what you want to have."

Luizzi signed the contract. "And now I'm listening. Speak."

"Not like this. The solemn formality this primitive form imposes on me would exhaust your frivolous attention span. Take my advice: go mingle in human life; I'm more present there than people think. I'll tell you about their lives."

"I'll be curious to hear it."

"Hang onto that feeling. Because from the moment you ask me to tell you someone's secret, you'll have to listen to the whole thing. Or you could refuse to listen to me, by giving me one of the coins from that purse."

"I accept, as long as there's no requirement that I stay in one place."

"Go wherever you want. No matter where you summon me, I'll be at the rendezvous. But remember, it's only here you can see me in my true form."

"Can I have the right to put down on paper everything you tell me?"

"You can do that."

"The right to reveal your secrets about the present age?"

"You'll reveal them."

"To publish them?"

"You'll publish them."

"To sign them with your name?"

"You'll sign them with my name."

"When do we start?"

"When you summon me with that little bell, anytime, anyplace, for any reason. Just remember: starting from today, you have only *ten years* to make your choice."

Three o'clock rang, and the Devil vanished. Luizzi found himself alone. The purse containing the days of his life lay on the table. He wanted to open it to count the coins, but he couldn't do it, and after carefully tucking the purse under his pillow he got into bed.